

# **CREID** INTERSECTIONS SERIES

## **Religious Inequalities and Gender**

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# **A Case of Several Jeopardies: A Study on the Intersecting Inequalities in the Everyday Lives of Poor Minority Christian Women and Girls in Pakistan**

Naumana Suleman

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## About CREID

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# **A Case of Several Jeopardies: A Study on the Intersecting Inequalities in Everyday Life of Poor Minority Christian Women and Girls**

Naumana Suleman

## **Summary**

The research paper endeavours to understand the situation of poor minority (Christian) women and girls in Pakistan vis-à-vis intersecting inequalities in their everyday life. The paper draws attention to poor minority Christian women and girls who are a neglected, vulnerable, and marginalised section of society. The paper attempts to highlight their experiences of social exclusion, economic marginalisation, religious discrimination, and gender inequality. The paper finds the case of several jeopardies where poor minority Christian women and girls face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in addition to those faced by an average Pakistani woman and/or girl.

**Keywords:** minority women and girls; intersecting inequalities; faith-based discrimination; social exclusion; marginalisation; stigmatisations; violence against minority women and girls; gender-based discrimination; freedom of religion or belief.

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# Contents

	Acknowledgements	5
<b>1</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>16</b>
	3.1 Greatest threats in scale and depth facing poor Christian women and girls	16
	3.2 Ability to dress the way they like	18
	3.4 Freedom of mobility	19
	3.5 Experience of public and social life	20
	3.6 Certain forms of employment	23
	3.7 Access to places of worship and religious celebrations	25
	3.8 Holidays on religious occasions	26
	3.9 Level of acceptance in society if they hide their religion	27
	3.10 Access to health services	28
	3.11 Experience of engagement with local or national authorities	28
	3.12 Particular forms of violence and harassment	29
	3.13 Response from men if violence occurs against women from the same community	30
	3.14 Response by the state/government if violence occurs against minority/Christian women	32
	3.15 Response by media if violence occurs against minority/Christian women	32
	3.16 Threats to personal property	33
	3.17 Forced conversions	34
	3.18 If religious minorities abandon their faith, are they safe?	37
	3.20 Changes in society that affect religious minority women	39
	3.21 Where do you seek support from in time of need?	40

	3.22 Role of religious institutes in the life of Christian women	40
	3.23 What makes you happy and contented and what do you feel proud of?	40
	3.24 Representation of Christian women and girls	41
<b>4</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>59</b>
	Annexe A	65

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# Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
FGD	focus group discussion
FIR	First Information Report
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
HRD	human rights defender
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PPE	personal protective equipment
SHC	Sindh High Court

# 1 Background

Pakistan represents a diverse society with regards to religion, culture, ethnicity, and linguistics. However, it lags behind in accepting the diversity that exists within the country. It is Pakistan's *de jure* obligation to ensure non-discrimination and equality

among its citizens, as enshrined in Articles 20 and 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan,<sup>1</sup> which respectively guarantee freedom of religion and equality among citizens. Pakistan is also party to several international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). These treaties prohibit any form of discrimination, including on the basis of gender and religion or belief. Nonetheless, discrimination against religious minorities is prevalent in the country and ranges from discriminatory laws and policies to a biased mindset at societal level. As a result of all these provisions, the social fabric of Pakistani society has been badly damaged and space for the acceptance of existing religious pluralism has been squeezed. Consequently, Pakistani religious minorities are faced with discrimination and faith-based violence.

With regards to the population of religious minorities in Pakistan, the most recently available official figures are from the national census held in 1998, as data on religious minorities from the national census carried out in 2017 has not yet been published. Based on the national census of 1998, Pakistan's religious demography is assessed as 96.28 per cent Muslims and 3.72 per cent religious minorities, including Christians (1.59 per cent), Hindus (1.6 per cent), Ahmadis (0.22 per cent), Scheduled Castes (0.25 per cent), and others (0.07 per cent – Sikhs, Parsis, Bhais, and so forth) (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics n.d.).

The population of minority women in Pakistan is estimated to be around 3 million,<sup>2</sup> of which approximately 90 per cent reside in Sindh and Punjab and 92 per cent belong to Hindu, Christian, and Scheduled Caste communities. The majority of these women work in both the formal and informal labour sectors, such as in agriculture, sanitation, the brick-kiln industry, and as domestic workers. Around 2 per cent of minority women work as teachers, doctors, nurses, professors, or do office work.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681\\_951.pdf](http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> On the basis of the previous national population census (1998).

In general, gender-based discrimination is rampant in Pakistan. However, women and girls belonging to religious minority or belief communities face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in addition to those faced by an average Pakistani woman and/or girl. Minority women face discrimination on several counts: being a woman in a patriarchal society, coming from religious minority communities in a religiously biased society, and socioeconomic marginalisation. Besides this, the agony of discriminatory laws and policies adds to the vulnerability of minority women and girls. Gender-based discrimination against religious minority women and girls ranges from social exclusion in daily life and different forms of harassment to abduction, rape, forced conversion, and forced marriage (Suleman 2014). However, they have been neglected by the state and their long-standing grievances have neither been given proper attention nor addressed. This study therefore focuses on the plight of religious minority women in Pakistan and specifically Christian women.

A recent study from the Center for Law and Justice, *The Index of Religious Diversity and Inclusion in Pakistan* (Aqeel 2020), noted that in public spaces, Hindu Scheduled Caste women can easily be identified by their attire (*ghagra*) and *choora* (bangle), sari, and bindi. Christian women are also sometimes identified from their attire as they do not wear a hijab/burqa or scarf, nor cover their head with a *dupatta*. Besides this, they are from a marginalised segment of society which is not associated with having a powerful identity, and this therefore makes them more vulnerable and susceptible to harassment.

In another survey conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP 2020), in the chapter on Sindh, several minority women and girls, particularly from the Hindu community, reported discrimination in their workplaces due to their religious beliefs. Sixty-seven per cent of the women reported that they had been persuaded by their fellow workers or business owners to convert to Sunni Islam. While these Sunni Muslims were not successful in converting these women, it is a constant form of harassment that they have to live with. Forty per cent of respondents reported that they have often had to put up with offensive comments and misbehaviour. Muslims often joke about their religious practices and it really hurts them, but they have to endure it. In response to the question of being bullied at their workplace, 59 per cent replied in the affirmative, out of which 91 per cent said they were abused verbally and 8 per cent faced physical abuse.



In 2016, as a progressive move to address the issue of forced conversions in Sindh, the Provincial Assembly passed a bill against this practice. However, before the governor's signature made it a law, religious and religio-political organisations (*Dawn* 2019) threatened to carry out country-wide protests. This resulted in the government withdrawing the bill. Relatedly, though the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act sets the legal minimum age of marriage at 18 years, nevertheless, for girls from a religious minority, this law is totally disregarded on the pretext of so-called religious conversion. In the rest of the provinces, the legal minimum age of marriage is 16 years for a girl.

Besides the absence of any law to govern matters related to religious conversions, the absence of rules of business for the existing personal laws of Hindu and Sikh communities as well as outdated personal laws (the Christian Divorce Act 1869<sup>3</sup> and the Christian Marriage Act 1872<sup>4</sup>) of the Christian community are among the major challenges for religious minorities, especially for minority women. The impetus for a change in the law started in late 2016, when a Christian man named Ameen Masih sought to divorce his wife, and approached the Lahore High Court when he realised it was impossible under the current Acts without accusing his wife of adultery (Bangash 2019a). The Hindu marriage bill was first passed by the Sindh Assembly and later by the National Assembly, but no rules of business (procedures about how it would be implemented) have been introduced so far.

This has made it hard for the communities, especially women, to regulate their marriages, as rules of business are necessary for the operationalisation of the law. The Christian marriage and divorce amendment bill was being redrafted in 2016 by the Ministry of Human Rights in consultation with a whole range of Christian leaders, churches, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, it has not been turned into an act of the Parliament so far, on the pretext of disagreement among different denominations and members of the Christian community (Bangash 2019b). Nevertheless, this disagreement should not stop the Pakistani government from fulfilling its obligations to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women as a party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://hrma.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/THE%20DIVORCE%20ACT%2C1869.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See [https://hrma.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/CHRISTIAN\\_MARRIAGE\\_ACT%2C\\_1872.doc\\_.pdf](https://hrma.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/CHRISTIAN_MARRIAGE_ACT%2C_1872.doc_.pdf).

(CEDAW). The government could have moved forward with the legislation by incorporating the valid suggestions and addressing the concerns. The Punjab Sikh Anand Karaj Marriages Act 2017, passed by the Punjab Assembly in 2018, regulate marriages of the minority Sikh community living in the said province only; therefore, such legislation followed by rules of business is required at the provincial and federal levels. Without these laws and their rules of business, the Sikh community would not be able to legally regulate matters related to marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, and so forth. Thus, an absence of these laws has particular implications for the women of the community.

Several human rights and minority rights activists have noted that in a number of cases, religious minority women (particularly Christians and Hindus), including minors, were abducted and converted to Islam through a Muslim marriage. Contact with their families becomes impossible on account of their conversion. Threatened and intimidated by their abductors, they state that they converted out of free will. It has been noted that the police and the administrative machinery usually side with the offenders who happen to be from the majority community, and socially and economically influential. The lower courts have generally ignored the circumstances, i.e. abductees' estrangement from their families, the crime involved (abduction and rape), the age of the so-called converted, the time difference between the issuance of conversion and marriage certificates, and so forth (Suleman 2014). However, recently two judgements have been passed. The first one, by the Lahore High Court in the case of Pumy Muskan, declared that minor children do not have the legal capacity to change religion on their own (George 2020). The second was passed by the Sindh High Court in the case of Mehak Kumari. The said verdict declared that an under-age convert could continue to stay with their non-Muslim parents (Khurshid 2020).

Maira Shahbaz's escape (*UCA News* 2020, unpaginated) from her abductor and her statement that 'I am 14 years old from Madina Town, Faisalabad. I was abducted and later forced to sign on plain documents, and later I was told that I have accepted Islam and had become a Muslim', further validates the aforementioned concerns of the religious minority communities.

In 2012, *Life on the Margins*, a study conceptualised by the researcher and author of this paper, was carried out by the National (Catholic) Commission for Justice and Peace on the situation of minority women (Jivan and Jacob 2012). The study included Hindu and Christian women from Sindh and Punjab, where 96 per cent of all minorities in Pakistan live. Five hundred women from each community were interviewed, representing different levels of economic exclusion. The study noted that a high proportion of the women interviewed (42.5 per cent) shared that they stopped short of replying to specific questions on faith-based discrimination, for fear of undesirable consequences if the issue was discussed. Nevertheless, 43 per cent of the respondents said that they or a member of their family had faced religious discrimination. The highest level of discrimination (40 per cent) took place in the workplace. Educational institutes rated the second highest at 24 per cent, and in their own localities, it was 18 per cent. Only 14.3 per cent said they had never faced such discrimination. The study further noted that hate speech is the most rampant form of discrimination faced by the minority women, with 32 per cent of them saying they had suffered such instances. While 27 per cent said they had faced difficult and derogatory questions, for instance making jokes about their gods and goddesses, and asking them questions such as: 'Why do you worship idols? How they can listen to your prayers? How many heads do your gods have? Do you worship cows? Do you drink cow's urine?' (Mirza 2020a, unpaginated), 19 per cent said that Muslim majority members had disallowed them from eating with them.

## 2 Methodology

This study is an effort to understand the situation of Christian poor women and girls in Pakistan, to bring poor Christian minority women's issues to the attention of decision-makers, and to utilise its findings for awareness raising and advocacy for the rights and freedoms of minority women. The key research questions focused on exploring the daily life experiences of poor Christian women and girls to examine how these are different from other poor women from the same context, as well as inspecting whether the religious discrimination faced by poor Christian women differs from that faced by affluent Christian women. This will help to ascertain what the relationship is between

religious discrimination and the social class system, and particularly how the intersection of religious affiliation and class affects the position of poor Christian women.

The research also looks at the differences between the experiences of men and women who belong to the same religious group in order to understand the intersection of gender with class and religious affiliation. Keeping this in mind, some questions were not asked to the male participants, due to a lack of relevance. Consequently, in some of the findings, their responses are not mentioned. Refer to Annexe A for the list of research questions.

This research paper uses qualitative and quantitative methods, including primary and secondary data. It uses a non-probability sampling method because it best suited the purpose of the study in seeking a quick appraisal, and considering the timeline and resources available.

The research paper focuses on Christian women and girls; however, the same exercise was carried out by a colleague with Hindu women and girls. This resulted in a separate paper and it would be of interest to further investigate the convergences and contrasts between the two papers. The reasons for selecting these two communities were that: a) women from the Christian and Hindu communities make up a major part of religious minority women and, b) these women usually face more challenges in their personal and professional lives due to their day-to-day engagement with the majority community. The women, girls and men that participated in the focus group discussions (FGDs) were chosen as per the following criterion. Firstly, we used different age groups and occupations so as to represent a variety of experiences. We interviewed domestic, sanitation, and factory workers, one beautician and one nurse. Secondly, the participants were from socially, economically, and politically marginalised sections of society.

Eight FGDs were held in July 2020, six with poor Christian women and girls and two with poor Christian men. Altogether, 36 women and girls and 12 men participated in the FGDs. The age group of women and girls ranged from 15 to 50, further divided into three age groups, that is, 15 to 20, 21 to 30, and 31 to 50 years, and the men ranged from 20 to 50 years. Two FGDs were organised for each age group to ensure a reasonable

number of participants in one group, and so that all of the protocols in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic could be followed properly. Participants of the FGDs were residents of Yuhannabad, which is said to be the largest Christian community settlement in Pakistan. They belonged to the poor section of society, working as domestic, factory, and sanitation workers. Most of them have been living in the vicinity for more than two decades and some have been living there for longer. They are socially, economically, and politically marginalised. Separate FGDs were organised with males and females so that they could share their experiences comfortably. While responding to the questions, a few respondents shared the specific incidents of discrimination they had faced, and their statements.

The following tables show the breakdown of participants who took part in the FGDs:

**Table 2.1 Age group 31–50 years, discussion held on 1 July 2020, in two FGDs**

Sr. #	Age	Occupation
	31	Domestic worker
	28	Patient care
	34	Domestic worker
	26	Teacher
	30	Day care (in school)
	30	Domestic worker
	39	Baby care
	34	Domestic worker
	36	Day care (in school)
	48	Patient care
	40	Day care (in school)
	30	Domestic worker

*Source:* Author's own.

**Table 2.2 Age group 20–50 years, (male group) discussion held on 2 July 2020, in two FGDs**

Sr. #	Age	Occupation
	48	House painter/labourer
	28	Private security guard
	39	Factory worker
	48	Mason/labourer
	43	Labourer
	40	Factory worker
	20	Factory worker
	26	Sweeper
	37	Sweeper
	38	Gardener
	37	Factory worker
	40	Sweeper

*Source:* Author's own.

**Table 2.3 Age group 21–30 years, discussion held on 4 July 2020, in two FGDs**

Sr. #	Age	Occupation
	26	Factory worker
	23	Domestic worker
	24	Factory worker
	30	Factory worker
	27	Sweeper (in Hospital)
	30	Beautician
	28	Baby Care
	27	Domestic worker

	29	Domestic worker
	27	Domestic worker
	22	Domestic worker
	30	Medical Nurse

*Source:* Author's own.

**Table 2.4 Age group 15–20 years, discussion held on 5 July 2020, in two FGDs**

Sr. #	Age	Occupation
	15	Domestic worker (works with mother)
	16	Domestic worker (works with mother)
	20	Sales girl
	19	Domestic worker
	14	Domestic worker (works with mother)
	15	Baby Care (domestic worker)
	17	Teacher
	20	Factory worker
	19	Domestic worker
	19	Factory worker
	19	Factory worker
	17	Baby care (domestic worker)

*Source:* Author's own.

A total of seven interviews were carried out with well-to-do Christian women that included parliamentarians, professors, bankers, and human (minority) rights activists in leading positions within their respective organisations. The objective was to compare the experiences of poor women with affluent ones from the same religious communities. These Christian women included representation from a few districts in Punjab and

Islamabad. The key research questions were posed using different angles during the FGDs and interviews, in order to ascertain the reliability and validity of the research findings.

Furthermore, the interviewers have significant experience of working throughout the country and therefore the findings have a general applicability in the country regarding the situation of minority women, which provides strong external validity of the research. In addition, though the research is primarily carried out with Christian women, due to the same socio-political context regarding minority rights and the situation of the major religious minorities in Pakistan, the research findings are relevant to the situation of minority women and girls from religious communities other than Christians, and it is particularly applicable to Hindu minority women.

The method of participatory ranking was utilised to generate the quantitative data. Transcripts were prepared of each participant, data was tabulated for each FGD, and analysis was carried out. They were approached by the lead researcher and her team and were selected after a brief interview and in accordance with the aforementioned criteria.

The researcher has been living in this vicinity since 1980 and therefore understands the community dynamics very well. She has observed the issues and sufferings of the community in general and of the residents of this settlement in particular. The researcher has been working on human rights issues, particularly focusing on minorities, for more than 20 years. Her positionality gives her an edge in understanding the realities on the ground up close. Subsequently, the respondents were more open to her due to her positionality, and were able to trust her to share their experiences without any pressure and fear. The researcher herself has faced religious discrimination, has a few times received offers to embrace Islam, and witnessed closely the consequence of religious hatred when her mother survived twin suicide attacks on two churches in Yuhannabad.

Lastly, using a small sample, this action research is a qualitative assessment based on the social and professional life experiences of the respondents and is not an extensive exercise. However, the study will be useful for minority women's rights advocacy and can



be utilised by decision-makers to resolve the issues impeding the full enjoyment of rights and freedoms of minority women.

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 Greatest threats in scale and depth facing poor Christian women and girls

The female and male groups ranked religious discrimination at 34 per cent and 32 per cent respectively as the greatest threat faced by Christian women and girls. They ranked sexual harassment second with 24 per cent women and 22 per cent men responding affirmatively. Women prioritised lack of education over unemployment and ranked these issues third and fourth with 21 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively. However, the male group graded these issues vice versa, allocating a 21 per cent score to unemployment and 14 per cent to lack of education. The women's group ranked domestic violence in fifth place at 4 per cent whereas men ranked the problem of receiving salary in a timely manner in fifth place with 11 per cent of the votes.

**Table 3.1** Categorisation of threats in scale and depth facing poor Christian women and girls

Ranking	Prioritisation of issues	Women's responses
01	Religious discrimination	34%
02	Sexual harassment	24%
03	Lack of education	21%
04	Unemployment	17%
05	Domestic violence	4%

*Source:* Author's own.

**Table 3.2 Categorisation of threats in scale and depth facing poor Christian women and girls**

Ranking	Prioritisation of issues	Men's responses
01	Religious discrimination	32%
02	Sexual harassment	22%
03	Unemployment	14%
04	Lack of education	21%
05	Salary (timely)	11%

*Source:* Author's own.

With the exception of three or four respondents who have been working in a church or community-run school or institution, every participant faced religious discrimination in one form or another. The respondents reported having to keep their utensils separate as ordered by the manager, business owner or household owner, or being asked to bring their own utensils as the most prevalent discriminatory practice. One female respondent shared:

*I have cooking skills, but I have been asked either to leave the job or do house cleaning once the owner came to know that I am Christian. It happened with me several times; therefore, I learned cloth sewing/stitching and now work at home to earn money for my children in a respectable manner.*

Another female interviewee shared:

*Though I was doing cleaning job at a household but was allowed to use kitchen to make tea for myself but using my own/separate cup. One day, I made tea for the office driver of the same household, also a Christian and served him in a cup from regularly used utensils. Later, the owner of the house scolded me for using the cup from regularly used utensils to serve him the tea. She later forbidden me strictly to do so in future.*

A male sanitation worker stated:

*It was comparatively easy to have a meal at road side eateries/small hotels before we were given uniform from our office, but now during lunch-time when we go to eat at any stall they recognise us from our sanitary worker's uniform and ask us to bring our own plate and glass or they allocate glasses and plates for us from their own utensils and keep them separate.*

### **3.2 Ability to dress the way they like**

On the question of being able to dress the way women and girls like, the majority of female respondents (97 per cent) replied in the negative and only 3 per cent responded affirmatively.

A girl shared:

*I want to wear kurta/shirt with jeans but not allowed to do so due to the conservative atmosphere around, within our own community and the society in general.*

Another female interviewee reported:

*I am allowed to wear pants (jeans) and shirt but, in my home only, not when I go outside of my home. It is due to the traditional mindset prevailing in the major part of the society that if a girl wears modern clothing, she does not have a good character or inviting boys and men for friendships, etc.*

As described in this quote, there is a belief that if a woman or girl from any community in Pakistan wears clothing that is considered to be modern or Western, they are inviting harassment. Consequently, the participants thought that it is comparatively easy for the wealthy members of both the majority and minority communities to dress the way they like to because they have their own vehicles to commute and do not travel on public transport where harassment incidents happen. Of course, women wearing the burqa or hijab are also harassed, as the clothing is just an excuse for harassment. This suggests that clothing choices for poor Christian women are closely tied to mobility. Where their options for moving around in public are limited, they are more likely to experience harassment due to their presence within the public sphere.

The contributions of the respondents reveal that they have imposed censorship on themselves regarding their choice of clothing due to cultural stereotypes and the commonly held interpretation of religious beliefs and influence of the majority community. These responses also revealed how gender-based stereotypes have further marginalised women from minority communities with regards to their personal and independent choices.

### **3.3 Religious customs in public life**

All the female participants responded in the affirmative to the question as to whether there are any religious customs that poor Christian women have to observe that are not part of their religion. For instance, 92 per cent of them wear a *dupatta* (long scarf) over their heads; however, 8 per cent don't. In another example, they shared that they are expected to cover their heads while Azan (the Muslim call for prayer) is said. A female interviewee shared that 'my owners ask me to do so, and if I don't obey then I have to face their anger and might have to lose my job as well'. Other respondents (except the ones working in community or church-run set-ups) also endorsed that they have faced these kinds of attitudes.

The respondents believe that these are the religious obligations of the majority community, but yet they have to follow them unwillingly. Besides losing their jobs, they also fear that they wouldn't be accepted or would be less accepted in society if they didn't follow certain religious customs, for instance, saying greetings and goodbyes in the same manner as the majority community does.

### **3.4 Freedom of mobility**

Both the female and male groups responded affirmatively that mostly freedom of mobility is restricted for poor Christian women and girls by their own family members. This is to protect them and prevent them from associating with members of other religious groups, particularly with the Muslim community. According to them, the reason behind this circumscription is the fear of being falsely accused of insulting the religion (because of blasphemy laws) and fear of abduction, forced conversion, and forced

marriage for minority women. However, 11 per cent of the female respondents shared that they were allowed to go out with their friends (from the same faith), relatives, and cousins, although 89 per cent of the females responded in the negative. Nevertheless, the male group responded with 100 per cent affirmation that females' freedom of mobility is restricted even with their friends (from the same faith), relatives, and cousins.

A female respondent shared:

*I am not allowed by my family members, particularly by male members, to go out of my home alone.*

Another girl stated:

*I am not allowed to have friendship with the girls from any other religious community. However, occasionally, my family allows me to go to my aunts' and uncles' places with my cousins.*

A women respondent reported:

*I am sometimes allowed to go out from home with my friends from the same faith community I belong to.*

### **3.5 Experience of public and social life**

On the question of female respondents' experiences at a social level and in public life, the majority of them (81 per cent) shared that they face religious discrimination at their workplace, while 19 per cent said that they never faced discrimination. However, interestingly, the ones who did not face discrimination were those who worked in the set-ups run by the church or by members of their own community. This was also the case in their educational settings. Most of the respondents had attained primary level (5th grade). The 61 per cent who did not face religious discrimination attended church or community-run schools, whereas the 39 per cent who faced religious discrimination were students in government or other private schools (not run by the church or their community). The majority of respondents use local transport and 89 per cent of them did not face discrimination while commuting. However, 11 per cent did.

While citing the examples of religious discrimination in the workplace, in school and while travelling, the respondents shared that at their workplace, they are not allowed to use the same utensils for eating or drinking as the owners or their Muslim colleagues used.

A female respondent reported:

*When I was a student at a government school I was asked to use a separate glass to drink water or bring my own bottle.*

Other interviewees who happened to study at a government school shared that they also faced the same behaviour, either from their teachers or class fellows.

Besides this, another female respondent reported:

*I faced visible discrimination regarding my teachers' behaviour giving me less attention in the classroom and scolding me bitterly on minor things. However, they never behaved in the same way with Muslim students.*

A few more interviewees more faced the same challenges while studying at a government school.

A female participant shared:

*In school, my class fellows and teachers used to insist me to recite Kalam [Islamic recitation] as part of the studies and when I do so, they keep on claiming that I have converted to Islam.*

Another female respondent shared:

*I studied at a government school and one day got injured as a result of corporal punishment by my teacher. Resultantly, bleeding started from a pimple at my back, but the teacher did not provide me with any medicine or medical care, rather asked me to sit on the desk at the end of classroom and join the class later when the bleeding stops. However, the same teacher gave medicine to a Muslim student who was suffering from backache and asked her to lay down on the bench.*

Furthermore, a female participant stated:

*My school teacher forcibly made me to read Arabic, and gave me corporal punishment when I read it incorrectly.*

With regards to experiences of discrimination while using local transport, a woman respondent shared that:

*The local rickshaw drivers usually do not take it into consideration even if I ask them that an unknown male passenger should not sit with me. However, when women in abaya/burqa or chadar [a very long veil] predominantly from the nearby Muslim community settlement sit in the rickshaw, they take care of the fact that no unknown male passenger should sit with them and if already sitting with the previous (Christian woman) passenger they would ask them to change the seat.*

Furthermore, a girl shared:

*Sometimes even female passengers (from Muslim community) will try hard to not get touched with them, when they come to know that they are from the Christian community.*

The respondents commute from and to Yuhannabad, which is a Christian community settlement, and it is thus easily to identify which faith group they belong to. This situation also highlights the intersection of caste-based and religious discrimination.

As with other provinces, the majority of the population in Punjab is Muslim. However, the majority of the Christian community in the country resides in Punjab, and a major proportion of the community members work as sanitary workers. Thus, Christians are associated with sanitation work (in the sub-continent in the past, sanitation work was carried out by Dalits who later converted to Christianity and Islam) which is unfortunately considered menial and dirty work by the majority of Pakistani society. Since most of the Christians in Punjab and most of the Hindus in Sindh Province are associated with the sanitation profession, there is therefore a mix of both caste-based and religious discrimination.

The respondents shared that household chores besides their job make it difficult for them to have regular leisure time. Occasionally, their leisure time is used to visit relatives or to go to the park, but only during religious festivals. A total of 97 per cent of respondents said that they hadn't faced discrimination during their free time in a public place (a park, etc.). However, 3 per cent said they had. However, when asked whether people in public places or places of leisure knew their faith and how they would therefore treat them, 72 per cent responded that their behaviour would be normal, particularly at eateries/stalls, but 28 per cent stated that it would not be normal, and rather, it would include religious bias. For instance, staff would keep them waiting to be served, ignore their order, use separate utensils for them, and their body language would be different, as if they were serving someone who did not deserve to be served by them. Among those who responded affirmatively, one female participant shared the following view:

*I think that particularly at the stalls in parks, if they would not serve us, it would damage their own business, as on the religious occasions a lot of people from the community go out for leisure. Therefore, if we will not face religious discrimination, it would be due to sellers' own business interest, not necessarily that they themselves are unbiased.*

This phenomenon of religious discrimination in the public domain results in the exclusion of religious minorities from social life and mainstream society, and also creates an environment of fear among minority communities. This is especially with regards to their acceptance in society and being safe from false allegations of theft, insult of religious feelings or religion of the majority community. This non-conducive social atmosphere for religious minorities hampers the ability of minority community members to engage with the majority community as equal citizens of the country.

### **3.6 Certain forms of employment**

The majority of respondents from the female and male groups in the ratio of 94 per cent and 100 per cent respectively stated that poor Christian women are primarily only considered for sanitation work, whether at the domestic level or in any institution. For



instance, cleaning the home or office, mopping floors, washing bathrooms, dusting furniture and so forth.

A female respondent shared that:

*My owners hired me for the cleaning of their house, though I told them that I can do cooking as well, but they were reluctant to do so.*

A total of 6 per cent of the women responded that they thought that other than sanitation work, poor Christian women are expected to work as domestic helpers, whereas middle class women are expected to work at beauty parlours or as medical nurses or teachers. However, as per the respondents, it does not matter what profession they are in, they will face religious discrimination. The majority of the respondents think that the reason behind this mindset is that mostly members of the Muslim community are being brought up in such a way that it is normal and common for them to discriminate against religious minorities.

One male interviewee stated that:

*They think that the Christian community only do sanitation work, therefore, they look down upon us.*

These biased norms are reinforced through discriminatory advertisements in newspapers from different government departments that state that a Christian or a person from religious minority communities (non-Muslim) would be preferred for the job of sanitation worker. Time and again, several civil society organisations and activists have highlighted this visible religious discrimination, but the pattern has not changed. The advertisers sometimes publish an apology or a corrigendum. However, the same kind of advertisements are repeatedly published from various departments (Hussain 2020). A study by the Centre for Law and Justice, *Shame and Stigma in Sanitation*, explores the issue of associating minority communities with sanitation work:

The Indian caste stigma attached to sanitation labour still survives in Pakistan and is recast as work for 'non-Muslims', particularly Christians in the Punjab

region. There are various menial work categories, but it is only the janitorial work where Christians are overwhelmingly represented and 'locked'.  
(Aqeel and Gill 2019: 4)

In 2015, the government of Punjab amended the policy of recruiting only non-Muslims (religious minorities) for sanitation jobs. Nonetheless, the practice of religious discrimination has continued by advertising sweeper jobs for religious minorities (non-Muslims)/Christians only (Bajwa 2015).

One male respondent stated that:

*I sometimes feel very discouraged due to the biased attitudes of the society towards me and the work I do.*

Another male participant shared that:

*It was easy to do my job as sanitation worker before the uniforms were introduced for us, as afterward everyone recognised us from our uniform. Therefore, it added into the discrimination we face.*

These first-hand experiences further add to the evidence as to how biased laws, policies, and approaches have contributed negatively to increase caste-based and religious discrimination and have affected the very social fabric of harmony and acceptance of religious diversity existing in society.

### **3.7 Access to places of worship and religious celebrations**

Both the male and female groups responded 100 per cent affirmatively that it is easy for Christian women and girls to access their places of worship, due to the fact that they live in a community settlement and can go to church on foot. However, as to the question of whether they can carry out their religious activities peacefully, though the response was affirmative, after the twin suicide attacks at two churches in Yuhannabad and the aftermath, they believe that their safety and security could be compromised at any time, which sometimes imposes limitations on their peaceful enjoyment of religious activities. However, in other localities, especially urban ones, people can easily access places of

worship as compared to the churches located in rural or remote areas. The main reason is the availability of public transport in rural areas.

### 3.8 Holidays on religious occasions

One hundred per cent of the respondents said that they could easily celebrate their own special religious days as they live in community settlements. Eighty-three per cent said they could get one leave day on Christmas Day only, and 17 per cent could easily take two leaves. However, most of these 17 per cent are those who have been working in community-run institutions. As Easter falls on a Sunday, which is already a holiday, the aforementioned 83 per cent are not allowed to take leave on Easter Monday.

One female respondent shared:

*If I take one extra leave on Christmas or on Easter Monday then owners deduct my two days' salary.*

Another female respondent shared the same experience:

*My owners do not allow me to take extra leave for religious occasions – in case I do, they deduct my salary.*

Adding to the conversation, a female respondent shared that:

*My colleagues from the Muslim community get more holidays on their religious occasions and in case they take an extra leave their salary isn't deducted.*

Another female interviewee added that:

*Sometimes our owners give our Muslim colleagues extra money as gift on Eid.*

A female respondent shared that:

*During Eid holidays, Christian household workers are asked to work in lieu of their Muslim colleagues, besides our own regular work and we are not paid with extra money for that extra work.*

These disparities in the workplace have contributed to further segregation among the members of different communities and this shows that even poor members of different communities suffer from the same phenomenon of poverty. However, the aforementioned biases further marginalise poor members from religious minorities. This unequal treatment inculcates a sense of superiority among household helpers from the majority community such that, although they belong to the same strata of society, they feel they have an edge regarding their religious identity.

### **3.9 Level of acceptance in society if they hide their religion**

Interestingly, 100 per cent of respondents from the female group replied affirmatively that they will be more accepted if they hide public manifestations of their faith. The same percentage of respondents think that they would be more accepted at (government) school if they hid their religious identity. Moreover, 25 per cent of respondents replied affirmatively that they are allowed to practise their faith in their workplace; however, they were all the respondents who happen to be working in a community-run set-up. Nevertheless, 75 per cent of the respondents replied that they are not allowed to practise their faith in their workplace, but their colleagues from the Muslim community can do so.

One female respondent shared:

*I wanted to say prayers at the household I work in, but my owner stopped me to do so and asked me that I should not offer my prayers in their home. I felt so bad, but of course I could not argue with them.*

Another female respondent shared:

*When I asked from my owner if I can offer prayer in one corner of the house she forbidden me to do so, and said that I can offer my prayer when I am back at my place.*

Different approaches with regards to permission being granted to the household staff to practise their faith in their workplaces increases the feeling of otherness, disassociation, and unacceptability that further pushes marginalised community members to live in silos.

### 3.10 Access to health services

On the question of easy access to health services, 94 per cent responded in the negative, as private services are nearby but the government hospital is a little too far away, and 58 per cent of respondents stated that if their faith is known then they are discriminated against on the basis of their religion while receiving health care. Sixty-four per cent of respondents stated that the male members of their community also face the same situation when their faith is known. For instance, as per the observation of a few respondents, if their faith is known to the medical staff then most of them will not conduct their medical examination properly, especially physical check-ups. However, their behaviour will not be the same in the case of a patient happening to be from the poor section of the Muslim community. For example, they may ignore them, or be unprofessional in doing their medical check-up as they mostly do with patients at government hospitals, but they will not be hesitant or actually avoid doing a physical check-up of the said patient.

One female respondent shared that:

*Once a doctor came to know that I am a Christian, the doctor further made distance between them and I was not checked properly and thoroughly as the doctor seemed reluctant to touch me.*

### 3.11 Experience of engagement with local or national authorities

Although most of the respondents do not get a chance to engage with the authorities, based on their observation and indirect experience, all of them were of the view that generally administrative authorities, and specifically the police, do not behave respectfully towards poor people. However, if they come to know that the poor person is from a religious minority community then most of the time their behaviour becomes biased, and they do not easily register their complaint and expedite investigation procedures. A total of 13 per cent of respondents stated that they were able to get a chance to speak with their owner in case of any complaint or grievance, but the remaining 87 per cent were never allowed to do so.

One male respondent shared that:

*I have come to know that persons faced torture who were arrested on the allegation of the lynching of two suspected supporters of the terrorists after the twin bomb blasts at two churches in Yuhannabad in 2015 [see Khokhar 2020]. Though torture by the police is reported by the marginalised members of the majority community as well, these young persons from the minority/Christian community faced humiliation as well on the basis of their religious affiliation, including derogatory remarks about their religion, besides the torture.*

### **3.12 Particular forms of violence and harassment**

All female and male respondents highlighted forced conversion as a particular form of violence that minority women face, other than the violence faced by the poor women (from minority or majority communities) in general.

Theoretically, there is no restriction on changing one's religion in Pakistan. However, right to conversion in a Pakistani context means conversion to Islam only. The environment does not allow conversion to another religion from Islam, which is treated as apostasy, punishable by death according to common interpretation of Islamic Sharia. In a number of cases, minority women (Christian, Hindu, and Sikh), including minors, were abducted and converted to Islam through a Muslim marriage. Their contact with families becomes impossible on account of their conversion. Scared by the abductors, they make statements before the judge that they changed their religion out of free will. The police and the administrative machinery usually side with the culprits who happen to be from the majority community, and socially and economically influential. The lower courts have generally ignored the circumstances, i.e. isolation from family, the crime of abduction and rape, the age of the so-called converted, and so on.

Furthermore, 97 per cent of respondents from the female group reported that invitations/offers to convert to Islam have become part and parcel of their life. Besides this, 3 per cent of respondents categorised the false allegation of theft as a form of harassment. In addition, both groups of respondents categorised sexual harassment of

the female members from minority communities as one of the major issues, with the ratio of 100 per cent (the male group), and 67 per cent answering affirmatively, 33 per cent dissenting (female group). Thirty-three per cent of respondents from the female group further shared that sometimes they are being harassed by the male members of their own community, although none of the respondents detailed specific instances.

On the question of domestic violence, a total of 17 per cent of respondents from the female group answered affirmatively and 83 per cent said that it does not happen. Interestingly, all the male respondents denied the presence of domestic violence.

The denial of the issue of domestic violence by male respondents shows the deep-rooted gender-biased mindset that exists in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. This has also affected the male members from the minority communities as well as a part of the same society. Denial of the issue of domestic violence by 83 per cent of the female participants can be interpreted in a few ways. They might not want to speak about bad events within their community or they may not want to speak against their community members. Some might not have experienced it at all. This also shows the effects of the general phenomenon prevailing in society whereby reporting domestic violence is perceived as giving your family a bad name, as domestic violence is considered to be an issue of that specific household or family.

### **3.13 Response from men if violence occurs against women from the same community**

The responses to this question were similar from both groups (males and females). However, ranking varies as per the following tables:

**Table 3.3 Women's group**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Prioritisation of issues</b>	<b>Women's responses</b>
01	Keep quiet/let it go	45%
02	Quarrel/fight	33%

03	Take legal action	19%
04	Solve through dialogue	3%

*Source:* Author's own.

**Table 3.4 Men's group**

Ranking	Prioritisation of issues	Men's responses
01	Solve through dialogue	58%
02	Quarrel/ fight	17%
03	Take legal action	17%
04	Keep quiet/ let it go	8%

*Source:* Author's own.

The most noticeable factor emphasised by both groups was that men from the community prefer to resolve the matter through dialogue or keep quiet in case the alleged offender is from the Muslim community. Legal action is a last resort. They don't quarrel as they think that the majority community has socioeconomic and political power and they cannot compete with them. Therefore, fights mostly happen if the alleged offender is from their own community. The type of violence includes a false allegation of theft, a false allegation of insulting religion, sexual harassment of women and girls, physical violence by the owners towards domestic workers, and so forth.

A female respondent shared that:

*My mother work as domestic worker and I accompany her and take care of a baby of that family. One day our owner, that baby's mother slapped me and said that I have not added the right amount of milk while preparing the feeder for the baby.*

The drastic differences in the responses of males and females regarding the options of solving the matter through dialogue and keeping quiet depicts the general mindset. It also reflects the so-called notions of masculinity associated with men and honour being associated with women which prevail in society. This doesn't allow male members to



accept that they will keep quiet rather than trying to solve the issue through dialogue, at least as it is a matter of a woman or girl from their community, and thus, associated with their owner.

### **3.14 Response by the state/government if violence occurs against minority/Christian women**

Both groups of males and females believed that the state/government authorities or police will not be supportive in cases where violence occurs against Christian women and girls.

One male respondent stated:

*It has been observed in the case of abduction coupled with forced conversion and forced marriage of a minority girl, the police will use delaying tactics to register the complaint, and even if registered they usually do not do it in a way that could make the case strong.*

A female respondent shared:

*if a complaint is registered in the case of harassment of a woman, at first instance the police usually blame the woman that she must have called for attention due to her modern cloths, not wearing duppata/scarf or not wearing an over head scarf. However, in the case of minority woman or girl, usually police gives a sense that besides the so-called clothing issues, Christian girls and woman are very open-minded/open to have relationship, thus they must have called for attention of the person.*

### **3.15 Response by media if violence occurs against minority/Christian women**

With regard to the response from the media, in the case of violence against Christian women, the men's group rated 50 per cent of the media being supportive and 50 per cent as not being supportive. However, 14 per cent of the women's group rated the media as supportive and 86 per cent as non-supportive.

One female respondent said that:

*We have never seen reporting of incidents of abduction, followed by forced conversion and marriage being reported in the media.*

Another female interviewee stated:

*Due to the negligence of the traditional media not reporting of violence against minority women, people in general do not have the understanding on the issues we face.*

The reason regarding the difference in responses of male and female participants might be that some male respondents were more sensitive towards minority women's issues and some might have not been so keen to engage with their specific issues. However, the issues that minority communities face in general are being reported through social media rather through the traditional media.

### **3.16 Threats to personal property**

A total of 17 per cent from the female group and 25 per cent from the male group responded affirmatively with regards to threats to personal property. However, 83 per cent from the female group and 75 per cent from the male group responded in the negative. The ones who responded affirmatively further explained that most of the threats are from relatives and those can be resolved through dialogue or legal recourse. However, a general norm is that a share of the parents' property is not given to daughters.

The threats to personal property from relatives usually divide families; for instance, one group supports party A and one group supports party B. This segregation and division impacts on the strength of the community as a whole. Since there is division into different groups, sometimes one group will not support the other even for a just matter/good cause in case some issue/violence occurs against the community.

In addition, if a girl or woman asks for a share of her property, as a general norm in society, she would be seen as someone who is bringing shame on the family, and, by

taking matters into the court, bringing shame on the community. In this case, minority women and girls are usually faced with a double pressure. On the one hand, they face pressure from society in general and on the other hand, they face pressure from their community. For instance, their stance to have a share in the property specifically through litigation could bring a bad name on the community which is already vulnerable and marginalised in society.

### **3.17 Forced conversions**

Fifty-three per cent of female respondents and 100 per cent of male respondents were aware of the issue of forced conversions. However, 47 per cent of female respondents were not familiar with the issue. Both groups stated that sometimes it happened through abduction and sometimes poor Christian girls are trapped through the promise of a better and more comfortable life. They are being targeted in a specific manner or through a specific approach to convert them as it is the general perception among a major proportion of the Muslim community in Pakistan that converting someone to Islam is a good deed. Minority women and girls, specifically young girls who are discriminated against and from the poor, marginalised, and socially excluded section of a patriarchal society happen to be an easy target for them. Both the male and female groups also had the impression that mostly Christian poor girls are targeted by Muslim boys and men in an ideologically motivated way with an intention to convert them to Islam.

One participant shared that she had witnessed an instance where ‘a Christian female domestic worker was converted to Islam by her owners on the promise that they will give her some property/piece of land as a reward’. Unfortunately, the participant didn’t know what had happened to the girl beyond the initial pressure to convert.

In the opinion of some of the participants, after the forced conversions and total disconnection from their parents and families, these girls are being trafficked as sex workers. The perpetrators can do this because these girls are totally disconnected from their families and no one would come after them to find out their whereabouts. Though there is a lack of evidence in this regard, in June 2020, the statement of Shirimati Meghwar in court upon her recovery after 18 months of abduction validates the

aforementioned opinion. It was stated that ‘after her abduction, she was converted forcefully and was pushed to work as sex worker’ (Sohail 2020, unpaginated). After this statement, the court handed over custody to her parents.

Maira Shahbaz, a young girl from the Christian community who managed to escape from her abductor (International Christian Concern 2020) stated that:

*I was abducted and later forced to sign on plain documents, and later I was told that I have accepted Islam and had become a Muslim. They pressurised me and made my video [being raped] and said they will upload it if I will not do what they say. They also told me that I had married Nakash [the abductor] and there is no way to go back.*

*(UCA News 2020, unpaginated)*

A recent case of the abduction, forced conversion, and underage/child marriage of a young Christian girl, Arzoo Raja, in Sindh Province has also been in the limelight (*News International* 2020).

A female respondent shared that:

*I was an employee at a beauty parlour and the owner of that parlour insisted me several times to embrace Islam and also offered that afterward she will ask her son to marry me and would also give me charge of the beauty parlour as its owner. Resultantly, I left that job in order to save myself from the forced religious conversion. As after resisting her offer to embrace Islam she could have pressurised me to do so or she can get me charged under the false allegation of theft or insult of religion (Islam).*

The same respondent further shared another horrific experience of hers:

*Due to professional jealousy, one of my Muslim colleagues mixed rat poison in my meal. When my condition got worse, I was taken to the hospital and my stomach was washed. Meanwhile, the owner of that parlour came at the hospital and requested me not to disclose the real situation to anyone as it is the matter of repute of her parlour. She took hold of all my medical documents on the pretext that she will be affording all my treatment, which*

*she did. However, after recovery, when I went to the parlour, I was told that they do not need my services anymore, and the same girl that mixed poison in my meal was allowed to continue job at that parlour.*

The offers to embrace Islam are commonly made to members of the religious minority communities, as in society it is commonly perceived as a good act. These kinds of offers are so rife that even a prosecutor has reportedly told members of the Christian community facing trial in an anti-terrorism court over the lynching of two men after the Yuhannabad church bombings, that he 'can guarantee their acquittal' if they renounce their faith and embrace Islam (Tanveer 2017, unpaginated).

This phenomenon of abduction, forced conversion, forced marriage, child marriage, and the rape of girls belonging to religious minorities has pushed minority community members to either refrain from or have minimal interactions with majority community members in their daily lives. These incidents have created a trust deficit among the minority communities towards the majority community, and resultantly the fabric of social harmony and co-existence has been immensely damaged. Due to this situation, fear has permeated minority communities which has resulted in further restrictions for minority women and girls by members of their own community, particularly as mostly these girls are vulnerable and have been targeted for these crimes.

One female respondent shared that:

*My family does not allow me to travel alone due to the fear of abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage.*

Another girl stated:

*I go to work with my mother and only allowed to travel with her to and from the household we work in, as my family fear for any mishappening, in case I work independently at that household or anywhere else.*

As it has been observed, several girls from minority communities have been seized when trying to get to higher educational institutions and travel freely. They therefore have a fear of all the above-mentioned crimes. Thus, these crimes have not only resulted in

further drift among the majority and minority communities, but have also enhanced the marginalisation of minority women and girls who are already vulnerable in a patriarchal society.

Besides this, deep-rooted gender-based discrimination in a patriarchal society has made minority women and girls an easy target for abduction and rape, and for child sexual abuse, as due to the social context, these crimes can be easily covered up under the guise of so-called conversion. This is happening in the same manner as when women are being killed by their close family members due to some personal dispute, property issues, and so forth. Those family members gain the sympathy of the general public and receive a pardon from another family member for the crime of murder as it is being covered up under the name of so-called 'honour killing' (Deutsche Welle 2018). Legislation introduced in 2016 means that killers will get a mandatory life sentence. Previously, killers could be pardoned by a victim's family to avoid a jail term. Now forgiveness will only spare them the death penalty (BBC News 2016).

### **3.18 If religious minorities abandon their faith, are they safe?**

The majority of female participants (53 per cent) think that Christian women can be safer if they convert; specifically, there will be no chances of being discriminated against on the basis of their faith. However, 47 per cent of them responded that even changing their religion will not make them safe, especially from religious biases, as they have heard of a case where a Christian girl married a Muslim boy and converted to Islam, but her in-laws still humiliate her by calling her *chur* (a derogatory term used specifically for female sanitation workers and for Christian women and girls). She had been kept as a domestic worker and the boy married again on the insistence of his family to one of his female relatives. The male group responded to the same question with 75 per cent in agreement and 25 per cent not in agreement.

### 3.19 Which groups of people within society are seen as the biggest threat for minority women?

**Table 3.5 Women's group**

Ranking	Groups	Women's responses
01	Drug sellers	63%
02	Sexual harassers	17%
03	Forced conversions	14%
04	Cyber criminals	6%

*Source:* Author's own.

**Table 3.6 Men's group**

Ranking	Groups	Men's responses
01	Drug sellers	42%
02	Sexual harassers	33%
03	Forced conversions	25%

*Source:* Author's own.

The majority of the participants categorised the drug seller group as the topmost threat as per the situation in their area. They think that being in a vulnerable section of society and happening to be from a minority community makes them an easy target for criminal groups who know that they can do the crime and can get away with impunity. Drug sellers target men and boys of the community and some community members are also involved in it for monetary gain. If a male member of the family becomes a drug addict, this brings an extra economic, emotional, and psychological burden on the female members of that family, which later badly affects their health and quality of life due to the extra work and extreme stress. This situation makes them further vulnerable to tolerating discrimination in their workplace as they need to earn to support their households. These responses indicate an increase in drug addiction in this community settlement.

Sexual harassers also pose a threat to women as their wrong-doings create more challenges for women who need to go out from the home to earn money. In the case of their family members coming to know about incidents of harassment against them, extra restrictions are then being imposed on women and girls, and their freedom of mobility is compromised.

A female respondent shared:

*The issue of harassment and sexual harassment has created more challenges for the girls and women, as we do not do any wrong thing, and we are not responsible for the harassment we face. However, we have to face the consequences by being restricting our freedom of mobility, putting time limitation on us, for instance, not allowed to go out alone in the evening, etc.*

### **3.20 Changes in society that affect religious minority women**

Women respondents ranked as prevalent religious discrimination being faced by the Christian community at 86 per cent, and lack of protection policies or mechanisms by the government at 14 per cent. According to them, all this contributes to the day-to-day difficulties of their community which ultimately affects the minority women as well. Male respondents ranked as prevalent religious discrimination in society at 100 per cent. They think that the discrimination they face in society on a regular basis has damaged their self-respect, resulting in frustration and affecting their family life. Besides this, the phenomenon has also placed limitations on interaction among minority and majority communities on an equal level.

Both groups (male and female) pointed out the increase in blasphemy allegations and quoted it as being one of the social-level issues that can affect the whole family, including female members of the family. The majority of both groups held the government responsible for all these changes. Both groups stated that poor men and women face almost the same challenges in their daily lives, ranging from religious discrimination, stigmatisation, to social exclusion. However, minority women are faced with some extra challenges, for example, sexual harassment, resulting in limitations on



their mobility and most importantly the challenges of abduction, forced conversion, and marriage, resulting in total estrangement from their families.

### **3.21 Where do you seek support from in time of need?**

Among the female respondents, in times of financial crisis, 67 per cent of women seek support from their workplace. They request salary in advance or take small loans from their owners that they return in instalments through monthly deductions from their salary. However, 33 per cent seek and receive support from their family.

A female respondent shared that:

*Sometimes I can get advance salary or loan easily and sometimes it is difficult to receive this support from the household I work in.*

The respondents did not answer about other forms of support. In order to manage day-to-day pressures, 92 per cent take support from their family members and 8 per cent from their friends or relatives. In the case of exceptional conflict, or to take any kind of advice, they seek support from their parents and siblings/family.

### **3.22 Role of religious institutes in the life of Christian women**

A total of 86 per cent of women respondents found the role of religious institutions helpful for the Christian community and for women and girls of the same community. They referred in particular to the church and community-run schools in their locality, and a technical training institute which has helped them to receive education and training at a low cost. However, 14 per cent of respondents termed the institutions not useful as they think they should be totally non-fee paying.

### **3.23 What makes you happy and contented and what do you feel proud of?**

The majority of respondents stated that they feel happy and contented when they support their parents, family, and others and when they wear new clothes. Moreover, they feel proud when they help others.

### 3.24 Representation of Christian women and girls

#### ***3.24.1 Words used to describe the Christian community, women and girls***

At a ratio of 100 per cent, both groups categorised the following two derogatory terms as being used for the Christian community on a massive scale in Pakistani society: ‘choora’ and ‘sai’.

Both groups ranked the following two terms at a ratio of 100 per cent, which are used as derogatory terms for Christian women and girls: ‘choori’ and ‘sain’. The terms *choora*, *choori*, *sai*, and *sain* are derogatory ones used for persons associated with sanitation work, e.g. sweepers, sanitary workers, and so forth, and are particularly used towards the Christian community as an expression of hate, discrimination, and to look down upon them, as a large number of sanitation workers belong to the Christian community.

Female respondents described that if they and a woman from the Muslim community work as a domestic help or sanitation worker, the derogatory word *choori* is never used for the Muslim woman and they are always being called *Bibi*, *Buwa* or *Apa G* (all of these are respectful terms to refer to women).

A male respondent shared that:

*I feel very bad when people call us choora, there is no respect for our profession in the society, I face discriminatory behaviours due to my work as sanitation worker.*

A female interviewee shared that:

*I feel a second class citizen when being called choori, it feels disgusting, but I have to tolerate in order to earn for my family.*

#### ***3.24.2 How Christian women are represented in school and educational curricula***

As per both groups (males and females), they never came across any mention of minority or Christian women in school and educational curricula.

### ***3.24.3 When decision-makers talk about women from minority communities, what do they usually say?***

While speaking in public, decision-makers speak respectfully and assure the audience that they will address the issues faced by minority women. However, both groups responded that these words are rarely transformed into action.

### ***3.25 Effects of Covid-19 on the Christian community, and how these are different as compared to the majority community***

According to the respondents, unemployment and financial constraints are the biggest effects of Covid-19 on the Christian community. Though the majority community has suffered in the same manner, in most cases, as per the respondents' experiences, Christian staff were laid off first and without any support, but Muslim workers were laid off at a later stage and in some cases, owners monetarily helped their Muslim staff members.

One male respondent, a factory worker, stated that:

*Christian workers were laid off first by the factory owners when lockdown started due to Covid-19. After a couple of months, Muslim workers were also laid off.*

Another female respondent, a domestic worker stated:

*My owner asked me to not come for work due to Covid-19 spread, but kept the Muslim domestic worker. Later, when I went to seek some help, they responded that they couldn't help me as their business is also going down and they will allow me to work once the Covid situation is settled. Meanwhile, I came to know from some co-worker that they have also laid off the Muslim domestic worker, but have been paying half salary to the person.*

### ***3.26 Access to health knowledge and care***

All the respondents gained knowledge about Covid-19 and precautions in this regard from the television. There has not been any specific camp set up by the responsible authorities in the locality to disseminate information. Being a densely populated area

where social distancing is not practised, special monitoring should have been done to ensure the safety of the residents.

***3.27 Do people say that you are Christian and thus you will be saved from Covid-19?***

Forty-two per cent of females were exposed to such persons who said that they would not get infected from Covid-19 because they are Christians. However, 58 per cent did not come across such people. From the male group, 58 per cent were exposed to such people, and 42 per cent were not.

***3.28 Are people treating you differently due to the Covid-19 outbreak?***

Ninety-seven per cent of the female respondents did not receive different treatment due to the outbreak of Covid-19; however, 3 per cent did. One female respondent shared that:

*Someone said to me that America is responsible for the Covid-19 outbreak. As the majority of Americans are Christian, therefore, Christians are responsible for spreading the virus.*

In the case of the male respondents, 8 per cent received different treatment due to Covid-19. However, 92 per cent did not receive any different treatment.

One male respondent, a factory worker, shared that:

*I faced discrimination at my workplace on the pretext of spreading Covid-19, as my colleagues and manager thought that since I am a Christian and does not keep myself neat and clean, therefore, I can spread the virus. However, other workers cannot spread the virus as they happen to be Muslim and at least clean themselves five times a day in order to offer prayer.*

A female respondent (medical nurse) shared that:

*Since the outbreak of Covid-19, I have witnessed that almost all of the Christian staff members, whether nurses, sweepers, ward boy/helper, etc. are deployed on priority in the Covid section of the hospital and usually these staff members are not provided with personal protection equipment, particularly in the case of sweepers.*

### ***3.29 Responses of affluent Christian women***

This section of the report details the responses given by affluent Christian women, providing an opportunity to compare their responses to those of the poor Christian women already detailed in the previous section. The interviewees highlight religious discrimination, forced conversion, harassment, weak financial and social protection in the existing Christian family and inheritance laws, false allegations of theft and blasphemy, a religiously-biased education syllabus, and policy, lack of education and resources, and poverty as among the greatest threats for Christian women and girls.

They also described that when in public wearing a head scarf or long scarf, *abaya* (in some places the official dress code), and covering their head with a scarf when Azan is called, are among the customs that Christian women observe which are not part of their religion. One interviewee shared that in some schools, colleges, and universities, especially the public ones, minority students are also compelled to follow the dress code of the Muslim faith such as wearing a headscarf, veil, and long scarf. In cases where the minority students do not follow this, they are mocked and criticised for their faith. In the same manner, most of the time during visits to the local bazaars and markets, if a woman is found to not have a *dupatta* (long scarf) on her head, someone will stop her and ask her to wear the *dupatta* properly.

Fifty-seven per cent of the respondents have faced discrimination in public life. Forty-three per cent of the respondents, however, have not faced this, although they have observed it happening to other members of the community. One interviewee shared that:

*I have suffered derogatory remarks from my class fellows and teachers on account of being a Christian. As a part of my job, I conduct sessions with female youth and community groups (from majority and minority communities). When I discuss the issues of gender equality and sexual and other forms of harassment, I and my team are criticised for being religious minority and for carrying out the foreign agenda to spread vulgarity in Pakistan.*

It has been a common allegation towards NGOs that since they receive funding from foreign donors, particularly from the West, they therefore advance their agenda in the country. Advancing human rights, particularly women's rights, is commonly perceived as a threat by sections of society with a patriarchal mindset. Once they are not able to dominate women, women will demand their rights. Women will be free in their decision-making, choices, and so forth, as they perceive Western women to be, and they equate it with vulgarity. For instance, getting divorced, dressing in a Western style, asking for a share of inheritance, getting married to a person of their own choice. In addition, if the human rights activist is from a Christian community, then they are labelled as an agent of America, Europe, the West, and so forth. If the human rights defender (HRD) is from the Hindu community, then they are labelled as an agent of India on the pretext that people practising/belonging to the same faith (Christianity, Hinduism) reside in those countries.

One interviewee reported that:

*I used to work in an office and during the month of Ramadan, staff members from religious minorities were not allowed to eat in the office.*

A parliamentarian shared a traumatising experience:

*I was part of a training with my several colleagues including male and female parliamentarians. My little girl was also accompanying me who I was supposed to drop at her boarding school in the morning. The female group was also composed of my closest colleagues from different political parties. The night we reached and gathered in one room after dinner, they somehow brought the issue of religion and started teasing me that I should convert to Islam because I was too good of their friend and they would be so unhappy if at the end I would rot in hell because I am not Muslim. First, I took it lightly and laughed about it but they didn't stop and kept forcing me to respond. That was probably the most helpless moment I had ever felt because I had never experienced anything like that ever. This is why I had no idea how to react. Of course, I did my best to respond and even in return said things I should never have under normal circumstances but it made them realise that they had*

*done some serious damage. I literally busted into tears and left for my room. It was almost midnight but I immediately arranged a cab with the help of a colleague, picked up my stuff, and left with my little girl. They kept calling me but I didn't respond until I reached home. Although they apologised later but one of them who was among the closest mentioned at least thrice in a polite way that I should convert but until then I had learnt to ignore her with a smile.*

One respondent shared that:

*I was part of an inter-faith harmony group and visited a Gurdawara and Badshahi Mosque. The group took a basket of sweets for the Gurdawara as well as for the Mosque as a token of harmony. Sikhs in Gurdawara warmly welcomed them and shared the sweets among all who were present at the Gurdawara, but when the group tried to follow the same practice in the Mosque, the Imams did not eat the sweets offered to them. This made me to realise that their mindset is religiously biased and rigid to accept anything from the minority faith group. This gesture of them was quite discouraging for me and the whole group.*

This shows the prevalence of a religiously biased mindset in society that perceives dining with religious minorities, eating from the things offered by them, and using their utensils as a sin.

Another parliamentarian shared that most of the people from the Muslim community call Christian women *churi* or *bhangan* (derogatory terms used for Christian and Hindu women, specifically for those who are associated with sanitation work). This reflects religious prejudices prevailing at different levels of society. Even affluent Christian women are not safe from religious discrimination, which shows that religious bias is not a class system issue only.

Twenty-nine per cent of respondents experienced in some places that if the serving staff know that the client is from a religious minority, they will serve them late, after serving the rest of the customers. According to 43 per cent of the interviewees, religious discrimination at eateries mostly happens in rural areas, and clients from minority communities are not treated in an equal

manner as compared to the majority community. However, 28 per cent of respondents think that religious affiliation does not matter as the eateries are concerned with their business and earning money. A respondent shared that:

*Sometimes, if by chance in some restaurant or market the dealing person (from another religion) gets to know that I am Christian, they just stare like I am from another planet, offers the eatables after serving all the others, considering it obligatory.*

While responding to the question of certain forms of employment that Christian women are expected to conform with, the majority of respondents categorised nursing and teaching professions for women who are educated. Otherwise, they should go into menial jobs such as being a domestic worker, sweeper, agricultural labourer, brick-kiln worker, and so on.

Eighty-six per cent of the respondents replied affirmatively that if they hide their religion they are more accepted. However, 14 per cent did not respond. None of the respondents have faced discrimination while accessing health services. However, they think there might be this kind of discrimination specifically at government hospitals in general towards people from the poor section of the society. If they happen to be poor and from a minority as well then this discrimination will be enhanced further and would be coupled with religious bias. Sixty-seven per cent of respondents experienced religious discrimination while engaging with government departments and officials. This form of religious discrimination includes delaying the work of the person belonging to the minority community, using lame excuses for the delay, and asking for a bribe to get the task done swiftly. Though these circumstances are faced by members of the majority community as well, if the religious identity of the persons belonging to the minority communities is revealed, it sometimes adds further challenges for them to get their work done. Seventeen per cent did not experience discrimination and 17 per cent did not engage with such officials. Thus, they don't have any experience in this regard.

A respondent stated that:



*There is no problem to get medical treatment from private hospitals but in government hospitals due to religious identity, it is difficult to get same standard of treatment as the majority does.*

One interviewee shared her experience regarding engaging with government departments:

*Most often, the trend of religious discrimination is quite vibrant when it comes to governmental officials. In my experience, they are least bothered to listen first and then if you negotiate with them firmly and logically they listen, otherwise they are not interested in responding to any of the queries even.*

The aforementioned experience shows that if a well-off member of the minority community can face such bias, then poor minority women and girls who are not well educated and cannot argue with the officials can face more challenges and difficulties in getting their work done.

Another respondent shared that:

*In my experience, law enforcement personnel, prison staff, and public defenders do not seem to be sensitised in treating suspects/inmates/clients from religious minorities without any bias. Furthermore, police stations across the country do not follow strict orders and deal poorly with minorities.*

An interviewee shared that:

*I have worked in an organisation where they gave me lower ranked job just because of my faith and gave upper ranked position to a girl who wasn't eligible for that.*

Regarding the question of particular forms of violence and harassment that Christian women and girls face being different from the forms of violence faced by Muslim women, the respondents reported the following; they all emphasised forced conversion and marriage, sexual harassment on the basis of their faith, false allegations of blasphemy, invitations to embrace Islam, and the perception of some Muslim men that Christian women and girls are an entity to easily have an extra-marital affair with. The

respondents further added that in the case of Christian women and girls working as domestic or factory workers or doing menial jobs, they face the challenge of receiving offers to embrace Islam on a regular basis. Their co-workers, supervisors, bus drivers (who provide a pick-up and drop-off facility), and owners are usual examples of those who ask them to convert. It is a very common understanding among the Muslim community that converting people to their religion is a noble act and they will be rewarded with paradise in return. Moreover, by converting people, they are saving their souls from hell. Respondents further added that as opposed to Muslim women or men, threats of false accusations of theft or insulting religion (Islam) are among the common challenges faced by Christian women, girls and men, in the case of any petty argument over any issue or not accepting the offer to embrace Islam.

Along with domestic violence, all the aforementioned challenges were described as the particular form of violence Christian women are subjected to. One interviewee stated that in her experience:

*The majority of women employed as domestic workers are accused of theft and are later maltreated by the police. Sometimes they might be wrongly implicated but they are forced to return the money which they often arrange by lending money at a high interest rate from some Pathan. In some cases, young domestic workers are forced to fast during Ramadan and are taught to offer prayer as well. They are continuously asked to convert which of course comes with some financial prospects for the family. Factory workers and good-looking girls working in offices at reception or at admin positions share similar issues with some variations.*

According to the respondents' experience, in some households' men are supportive of their female family members, in the case of any violence occurring against them, or being supportive of their education, doing a job, or gaining a professional career. However, in most of the cases, they have observed that Christian men prefer to keep silent, considering themselves as a weaker segment of society in comparison to the majority community. However, sometimes they protest or seek legal recourse as well.

A respondent shared that:

*My parents have been supportive for my higher education and professional career building.*

Another respondent reported that:

*I have been supported by my family to live independently and work in a different city.*

Another respondent stated:

*My parents, specially father, supported me in my political career.*

And one respondent stated:

*I am a self-made person, specifically my father did not play a supportive role in my career building. I feel bad when I recall all the challenges I have faced not only from a patriarchal society outside but from inside the house as well.*

On the question of the state's response on violence against Christian/minority women, all the interviewees were of the view that usually there is not much attention given to matters related to minority women, specifically of abduction, forced conversion, and marriage. It is very rare that these kinds of matters are decided in favour of Christian girls and women. As a first step, it is very difficult to register the FIR (first information report) against such matters.

The police are usually proactive against the forced marriages of minor girls but in the case of forced marriages of Christian minor girls precluded by forced conversion, the investigative officer tries his best to prove the maturity of the girl rather than invoking the child marriage restraint laws.<sup>5</sup> In Sindh Province, the Act does not allow the marriage of girls under 18 years of age, and in the rest of Pakistan, the Act does not allow the marriage of girls under 16. However, if a minor girl from a religious minority community is abducted, converted, and married off, on the pretext of conversion, the judiciary usually interprets her age in accordance with Islamic Sharia law which says that a girl is mature at the age of puberty. In contrast, in the early age or forced marriage cases of Muslim under-age girls, the police act quickly and count it as an offence against the Child Marriage Restraint Act that criminalises under-age marriages. The case of Arzoo Raja is

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<sup>5</sup> For Punjab see <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/147a.html> and for Sindh see <http://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications/PUB-13-000734.pdf>.

a recent example of this trend.<sup>6</sup> However, after further intervention was made by the lawyer of Arzoo's parents under the Child Marriage Restraint Act and a strong advocacy from different rights groups to uphold the rights of minority children and implement the provisions of the Act without any discrimination<sup>7</sup>, Arzoo was rescued from her abductor and sent to a shelter home on the Court's orders.<sup>8</sup> The case is set for the next hearing.

According to the interviewees, the electronic media barely highlight the violence perpetrated against minority women and girls unless it is a high-profile case. Print media (mostly English ones) sometimes publish columns written on such issues; however, social media has played a vital role in highlighting such cases. For instance, it is rare that the cases of forced conversion and marriage of a religious minority girl would get attention or be covered by the electronic media, though social media is vital in highlighting such cases and some print media as well. The reason, it could be argued, may be the specific religiously biased mindset or extremist outfits that can later create problems or threaten the said outlet due to highlighting forced conversion as it is commonly seen as a good deed to get someone converted to Islam.

All the respondents replied affirmatively to the question of threats to Christian women and/or their families for their property. One reason has been the absence of proper inheritance law. Within the community, it usually happens when the property is transferred to the children. As per common practice, it is mostly sons who are considered to be the heirs of the parents' property. Girls are primed so as they revoke their share of property in favour of their brother, and the money is spent by the parents on their daughter's marriage. The dowry is therefore considered as their share of their parents' property.

Matters related to inheritance for Pakistanis, including the Christian community, are governed under the Succession Act 1925,<sup>9</sup> introduced during the British Raj into the sub-continent and which is open to interpretation. However, in a judgment by the Supreme

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<sup>6</sup> [www.asianews.it/news-en/Karachi:-Court-approves-the-conversion-and-marriage-of-13-year-old-Arzoo-Raja.-The-mother's-desperation-\(VIDEO\)-51455.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Karachi:-Court-approves-the-conversion-and-marriage-of-13-year-old-Arzoo-Raja.-The-mother's-desperation-(VIDEO)-51455.html).

<sup>7</sup> [www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Minority-Women-Forum-calls-for-respect-for-minority-children-51470.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Minority-Women-Forum-calls-for-respect-for-minority-children-51470.html).

<sup>8</sup> [www.dawn.com/news/1588201/underage-marriage-13-year-old-arzoo-recovered-after-shc-orders-says-wahab](http://www.dawn.com/news/1588201/underage-marriage-13-year-old-arzoo-recovered-after-shc-orders-says-wahab).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://pja.gov.pk/system/files/Succession%20Act%201925.pdf>.

Court of Pakistan in 1992,<sup>10</sup> the judge decided to share a property equally among Christian litigants, and since then, this judgment has been used to support equal shares when any inheritance matter arises among Christians in Pakistan. Sometimes Christian families living in small towns or villages experience threats from the Muslim community to vacate their homes. According to one respondent, in most blasphemy cases, the bone of contention has been the property of Christian families. Or if some other issue has arisen, illegally dispossessing and illegally occupying the properties have been the norm.

As per the respondents, cases of forced conversion and marriage happen in two ways. One way is to abduct, harass, and rape the woman or girl to get it done and then the offenders hide their crime of abduction, rape, and forced marriage through forced conversion (Shahid 2020). The other reason forced conversion and marriage happen is economic disparity and poverty which forces minority girls/women to do bonded labour, become slaves to the landlords, and do all types of menial jobs in society. Knowing their condition, Muslim men promise them a better future and life, and thus, to escape poverty, slavery, bonded labour, and the stigma of untouchability, minority girls elope with them (Sahoutara and Ousat 2019). However, afterwards, discriminatory behaviour towards these girls is reported; for example, using the derogatory term '*chori*' for them, which is used for Christian women, on the pretext that though they have converted to Islam they are not Muslim by birth. They are thus referred to using derogatory remarks used for their community (Christian or Hindu), may suffer domestic violence, and are not accepted by the family or relatives of the boy, and so forth.

Most of the respondents identified the following issues faced by the minority community, which also affects the position and situation of Christian women. They cited religious extremism, a patriarchal society/mindset, religio-political parties, and religious leaders as the biggest threats to Christian women and girls wanting to live freely and openly. The biased mindset and increased intolerance in society towards religious minorities considers women as a commodity, a view which is backed by a more than 150-year-old legal framework to address the matrimonial issues of the Christian community, which has not been amended despite demands. The increased intolerance is evidenced by several blasphemy cases having been registered in recent months (Noorzai and

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<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.ljcp.gov.pk/Menu%20Items/Reports\\_of\\_LJCP/10/96.pdf](http://www.ljcp.gov.pk/Menu%20Items/Reports_of_LJCP/10/96.pdf).

Momand 2020). Abduction, forced conversion, and marriage cases have also been reported (Shahid 2020).

Regarding matrimonial issues, the absence of or outdated personal laws of the religious minority communities is one of the challenges for them, especially for minority women and girls. In 2016, Hindu marriage bills were passed by the Sindh and National Assemblies, respectively.<sup>11</sup> However, as yet, no rules of business have been introduced with regard to the implementation of the said legislation. The Christian marriage and divorce amendment bill has been presented several times but did not transform into legislation, on the pretext of disagreement among some sections of the said community. The Sikh Anand Karaj Marriage Act 2017,<sup>12</sup> passed by the Punjab Assembly in 2018, is only applicable in the said province. So far, no such legislation has been drawn up in other provinces. In addition, family laws are not in place for the other minority communities that provide for a marriage registration/certificate and other important safeguards and arrangements for the fulfilment of human rights.

Section 7 of the Christian Divorce Act 1869<sup>13</sup> provides that courts (in Pakistan) can act on principles and rules which are conformable with divorce law in the UK. This section was omitted through an Ordinance in 1981, by the-then dictator General Ziaul-Haq. A repeal of Section 7 left the Pakistani Christian community with the only option of Section 10, for divorce or dissolution of marriage on the basis of adultery. However, if a Christian woman is the petitioner, she has to submit the petition on the grounds of her husband's conversion and marriage with another woman; or on the basis of adultery coupled with other cruel charges, for instance, rape, sodomy, or bestiality. However, if she files the petition under the charges other than adultery, she would be entitled to a divorce *a mensa et thoro*, which means that the spouses may legally live apart, but they are still legally married. This hampers the possibility of both persons starting a new life, and, conversely, binds them forcefully to continue a relationship that no longer exists in any practical sense.

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<sup>11</sup> See the National Assembly [www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1491458181\\_468.pdf](http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1491458181_468.pdf) and the Sindh Assembly [www.pas.gov.pk/uploads/acts/Sindh%20Act%20No.IX%20of%202016.pdf](http://www.pas.gov.pk/uploads/acts/Sindh%20Act%20No.IX%20of%202016.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> See <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/2698.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://hrma.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/THE%20DIVORCE%20ACT%2C1869.pdf>.

Since the repeal of Section 7, Christian couples seeking to dissolve their marriage on 'no-fault' grounds, without harming the modesty and dignity of each other, have started facing a number of complications. An increase in conversions has also been observed after this amendment, as the couples are forced to convert to another religion just to end the bondage of an irretrievably broken-down marriage.

Christian women suffer more than men after divorce under Section 10, as they face discriminatory behaviours and social taboos on the pretext of adultery, and this undermines their human dignity. Besides jeopardising their dignity, this phenomenon also hampers the probability of the woman restarting her life in a dignified manner because of the stigma of adultery. The woman and her family suffer enormous psychological and emotional pressure and trauma, which is sometimes not reversible. Thus, divorce under Section 10 enhances the social marginalisation of a Christian woman, who is already marginalised by being a woman in a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, the Christian personal laws (the Divorce Act 1869 and the Christian Marriage Act 1872) need reform to make them compatible with contemporary social needs and realities. For instance, the more than 150-year-old law that allows the marriage of 13- and 16-year-old girls and boys, respectively, does not conform to existing state law and the international obligations of Pakistan. In addition, nowadays, most marriages are solemnised after sunset, which is contrary to the Christian marriage law in its current form.

With regard to the role of religious institutions in Christian women's lives, the majority of the participants stated that these institutions play an important role. For instance, there are several schools, technical colleges, vocational training centres, and mother-and-child health centres for women that serve in their respective field but are not sufficient as per the population of the community. They are also engaged in the civic education of minority women and conduct frequent career guidance sessions for minority girls, in which they are guided to opt for good subjects and professional fields. This skill development helps them to earn a livelihood through respectable means.

Nonetheless, some of the interviewees categorised the role of religious institutions both positively and negatively. From a positive point of view, these institutions teach them moral values, give them knowledge of their faith, and provide employment opportunities to them. However, on the negative side, politics is part of these institutions. One participant explained that in her view, harassment, including sexual harassment, happens in these organisations. The organisations are usually run by one person in a personality-centric manner.

One interviewee mentioned that 'Ahl-e-Kitab' (people of the book) is the only term which is used by some members of the Muslim community for Christians as a gesture of respect. On the contrary, all the respondents mentioned that several derogatory and hateful terms such as *choray*, *sai* (the deliberate and wrong pronunciation of the word Isai, the followers of Isa, derived from Isa, the Arabic translation of Jesus, used by the Muslim community), *kalay* (dark-skinned), untouchable people, and *kafir* (infidel) are the terms used by the majority of the Muslim community for Christians. This creates and reinforces religious otherisation in the public perception. Furthermore, *choray* and *sai* are the common derogatory terms that Muslim community members use for Christians. Also, *kaali* and *choori* are the common derogatory terms specifically used for Christian women.

While answering the question of how the media presents Christian women, the respondents shared that they are usually shown as being the poor deprived people of the nation, doing nominal jobs, having extra-marital affairs, and habitually using alcohol and smoking. They are also depicted as sometimes having a dark complexion, a Western or modern attire, and always having an open and bold attitude, especially towards men. One drama was broadcast in which a Christian family was shown as comprising sanitary workers and domestic workers. In another drama, a Christian girl is attracted to the Muslim teachings and converts to Islam. One respondent categorised two TV serials, *Maria Bint e Abdullah* (Chaudhry 2018) and *Baji Irshaad* (UCA News 2017) as notorious with regard to Christian women.

As per the respondents, most parliamentarians do not want to discuss the issues of Christian or minority women, but if some parliamentarians dare to talk about these



issues, they are usually asked not to do so by other parliamentarians. Often, the decision-makers including parliamentarians are in a position of denial and pretend that they are treating all citizens equally in terms of providing opportunities and facilitation. However, the reality is totally in contrast to this.

The interviewees stated that unemployment has been the major effect of Covid-19 on the Christian community. Besides this, they also suffer the stigma of doing nominal jobs and being the perceived carriers of infection, which is associated with them as the majority live in slums. Since the majority of Christians live in impoverished settlements where sanitation and hygiene services are already non-existent, it is impossible to maintain social distancing. Therefore, many such settlements have been sealed after being declared red zones.

In identifying the risk of coronavirus affecting members of the Christian community in comparison to others from the mainstream religious community, most of the respondents shared that sewerage tasks are continuing and mostly this job is for the people of the Christian community. For quite a long time, no proper personal protective equipment (PPE) was provided to them, and so they are at higher risk. In addition to this, Christian medical staff are also put on the frontline to treat Covid patients. Moreover, the majority of religious minorities are living in slums and congested houses and thus there is a higher probability of infection.

During this pandemic, minorities are being affected by religious discrimination more than ever before. For instance, discrimination has been reported during distributions of food relief packages. Furthermore, there have been alleged complaints about discrimination during ration distribution or offers of conversion to Islam. In some areas of Punjab, some organisations have refused to give rations to the Christian community because of their faith and they were asked to embrace Islam in order to receive ration packages (Mirza 2020b).

## 4 Conclusion

Investigating the situation of the rights and freedoms of Pakistani religious minority women and girls is an uphill task. A major obstacle is the absence of official data relating to their population, their social and economic conditions, their education and employment, and so forth. In contrast, information regarding majority women exists in this regard (UN Women n.d.). The Pakistan National Census Report of 1998<sup>14</sup> does not show separate data on religious minority women and the results of 2017's national census regarding the minority population have not yet been published.

The most striking finding of the research is that a substantial number of respondents ranked religious discrimination as the major challenge and threat for minority women. This percentage reveals salient religious prejudice towards religious minorities in Pakistan. The phenomenon of sexual harassment has further posed serious challenges to their freedom of mobility and has made them impose self-censorship in terms of their personal choices to dress the way they like to, for instance, not wearing jeans, shirts, or wearing a *duppata* (long head scarf), an over head scarf, and so on. The level of religious discrimination they face in their workplaces, in social life, and during public interactions (when their faith is known) further strengthens the fact that compared to previous years, religious discrimination has become more prevalent in Pakistani society. Furthermore, the offers of specific forms of employment, certain forms of discrimination in their workplaces, and the use of hate speech and derogatory terms for the Christian community reveals deeply entrenched biases against religious minorities.

A noticeable number of respondents highlighted the phenomenon of forced conversion accompanied by the crimes of abduction, rape, and under-age forced marriage, which once again challenges the claim by some segments of society that this issue does not exist.

In addition, the continued offers to embrace Islam made to religious minorities, and particularly to minority women, signifies the shrinking space for freedom of religion or

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<sup>14</sup> See [www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/POPULATION%20BY%20RELIGION.pdf](http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/POPULATION%20BY%20RELIGION.pdf).

belief and further adds to the evidence that minorities are being excluded from the mainstream. This shows that forced conversions and pressures to convert are a very significant issue facing the Christian community.

A lack of any protection mechanism, and the absence of any law and policy to address discrimination and violence against religious minority women further adds to their vulnerabilities. Moreover, it depicts a reluctance at state and government level to address the issues and threats faced by women and girls of religious minority communities. Covid-19 has further revealed the biased mindset prevailing at several levels in large parts of Pakistani society towards religious minorities, including minority women.

The research results also show that affluent minority women also suffer from religious prejudice that is prevalent in Pakistani society. Thus, religious discrimination is not the phenomenon of poor members or women of minority communities only. Affluent Christian women also suffer from inequalities in some instances, but this might not be with the same level of intensity as that faced by poor minority women. Therefore, this finding strongly challenges the common perception and argument that religious discrimination happens due to poverty or against poor people only and is a phenomenon of the social class system. As in this research paper, Christian women from both the well-off and poor sections of society have reported religious discrimination. For instance, women from both sections have been repeatedly asked/ offered to embrace Islam, have been asked to use separate utensils, have been harassed due to their religious identity, and so forth.

All these issues undermine the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms of Pakistani religious minority women and girls. The elimination of inequality from laws, policies, and society, and an assurance of non-discrimination among all citizens is a legal obligation of the Government of Pakistan under the country's Constitution, and as a party to several international human rights treaties, including CEDAW.

Hence, Pakistan needs several interventions at multiple levels in order to expand the space for religious freedom and to become a society based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

## 5 Recommendations

1. Governmental and non-governmental sections should initiate programmes for the socioeconomic empowerment of minority women. For instance, loans for business, capacity building, and skill-based trainings. Moreover, programmes and campaigns on gender equality and awareness should be undertaken, with a special focus on minority women.
2. The government and private sector should involve minority women in decision-making through their inclusion as staff members in key positions and as beneficiaries of different programmes.
3. Robust safeguards should be introduced and promulgated in all workplaces for minority women to be protected from every kind of exploitation. Moreover, the implementation of the Protection against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act 2010<sup>15</sup> should be ensured.
4. The services of minority women in different professions, especially in health and education, should be recognised at government level.
5. Robust legal and judicial safeguards should be enforced against forced conversions, marriages, and the related crimes of abduction and rape.
6. Independent, autonomous, and permanent Commissions for Minorities (the one established by the government is not a statutory body) should be provided with

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<sup>15</sup>

See [www.qau.edu.pk/pdfs/ha.pdf](http://www.qau.edu.pk/pdfs/ha.pdf).

adequate human and financial resources and constituted at federal and provincial level, with the powers of a tribunal, to examine complaints and with timely redress.

7. A common Civil Code should be enacted, to enable marriage without conversions, and with equal rights in all matters concerning marriage and divorce.
8. Current family or personal laws for religious minorities in Pakistan should be reviewed by a competent body to check injustices against minority citizens, particularly minority women, and to ensure that these laws comply with human rights standards to prevent the overriding effect of the personal law of the majority community. Moreover, family laws should be enacted for Sikh,<sup>16</sup> Kalash, and other minority communities that provide for a marriage registration/certificate and other important safeguards and arrangements for the fulfilment of human rights.
9. The curriculum for schools, colleges, and universities should be revised to eliminate existing hate speech against religious minorities and must include their role in the progress of Pakistan.
10. The federal and provincial governments should ensure comprehensive implementation of the 5 per cent job quota for minorities and an equivalent quota (5 per cent) should be introduced at all government educational and technical training institutions.

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# Annexe A

## Research Questionnaire

1. What are the greatest threats in scale and depth facing poor women in context x from their perspectives? After identifying them all, ask them to list them in order of impact and explain why.
2. On a day-to-day basis, how are poor women from religiously marginalised backgrounds able to dress in the way they like without being harassed more than other women from other backgrounds?
3. When out in public, are there any religious customs that poor women from a religiously marginal group have to observe that are not a part of their religion?
4. To what extent is the freedom of mobility of women who belong to religiously marginalised groups circumscribed by being members of their own community, so as to 'protect' them or 'prevent' them from associating with members of other religious groups?
5. Describe experiences of poor women from the religious group being out in public *in comparison to other poor women* from the mainstream religions, for example:

Work

Study/education

Leisure

Transport

Community service

6. Are there particular roles within your context that women from your religious background are expected to conform to, including certain forms of employment? If so, what are they?
7. To what extent are poor women able to access their place of worship and carry out peaceful religious activities, such as prayer and worship, in comparison with other women of mainstream faiths?
8. To what extent are poor women able to mark important occasions *freely* within their religious calendar compared to those of the mainstream religion?
9. To what extent do poor women feel they are more likely to be accepted when they hide public manifestations of their faith?
10. Describe poor women of religiously marginalised backgrounds' experiences of accessing health-care services. Are there differences with the experiences of poor women or poor men more broadly? What accounts for this?
11. What are the experiences of women from poor religiously marginalised backgrounds in engaging with local/national authorities? How are they different from others?
12. Are there particular forms of violence or harassment that poor women from religiously marginalised backgrounds experience more or differently from other poor women? Who are the perpetrators? And what are their drivers for such violence? Do we have examples?
13. Are there *particular* forms of violence that women from your religious group are *typically subjected* to?
14. How do men from the same religiously marginalised group typically respond to violence perpetrated against women?

15. How does the state typically respond to violence perpetrated against women from this religiously marginalised group?

16. How does the media typically respond to violence perpetrated against women from this religiously marginalised group?

17. Do women or their families experience threats to their property *in any way* or their land from groups of the same religious background or different? a) If so, who was the threat from? b) How is it dealt with?

18. Are poor women from religiously marginalised backgrounds targeted in ideologically motivated grooming processes? How does that happen? Why? What are the outcomes? What redress mechanisms exist? What are the longer-term outcomes for the women and the community?

19. Have there been cases of forced conversion? How do they happen? What are their outcomes?

20. Have you ever felt it might be necessary for members of a religiously marginalised group to abandon their faith, or convert to another religion, in order for them to feel safe?

21. Which group(s) are the biggest threat to poor women from religiously marginalised groups to live openly?

22. What changes facing the religiously marginalised community at the level of

- the religious community itself
- the broader society
- state policy
- non-state powerful actors

affected the position and situation of poor women of the same religiously marginalised background? What, or who, do you think is responsible for these changes?

23. Very broadly, are these experiences of religious targeting that women face that men from the same religious group don't face?

24. How do poor women resort to for support in times of

- financial crisis
- day-to-day pressures
- exceptional conflict
- advice of any kind?

25. What role do religious institutions of the same faith play in the lives of poor women from their perspective? What makes you feel happy? When do you feel fulfilled? Tell us about a situation/time in which you felt proud of yourself

#### **Experiences of religious otherisation – public perceptions**

1. What words do you hear used to describe your religious group within your context, and by whom?

2. What words do you hear used to describe women from your religious group within your context, and by whom?

3. How are the words used to describe women from your religious group different from the words used to describe women from other religious groups within your context?

4. If relevant, how does ethnic and religious identity affect how people interact with you?

5. Describe the images the media uses to represent women from your religious background.

6. Do women from your religious group feature in television or radio programmes? If so, what roles do they typically play?

7. How are women from your religious group represented in school and educational curricula in your country?

8. When decision-makers in your country, such as the state, talk about women from your religious group, what do they typically say about you?

### **Questions specific to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Christian community**

1. How has the emergence of the risk of Covid-19 affected them as a community?

2. Is there a difference between how the risk of Covid-19 has affected them in comparison to others from the mainstream community?

3. Access to health knowledge and care: against the background of the current Covid-19 pandemic, do they feel their access to information and treatment is more/less/the same as members of the mainstream religion?

4. Have they ever been exposed to people linking what religion you belong to and protection from Covid-19? i.e. those that follow a particular religion are not as likely as the others to get infected with Covid-19?

5. Are people treating you differently because of Covid-19, i.e. in terms of employment, in terms of interactions, in terms of name calling?

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